University of Virginia Students Hunger Strike for a Living Wage for Staff 2012

February 17
2012
to: March 1
2012
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Charlottesville, Virginia
Location Description: The University of Virginia Main Campus

Goals:
The hunger strikers wanted the University to institute a minimum wage for its employees and the employees of its contractors of $13 per hour before calculating benefits, indexed to yearly inflation. The campaigners also demanded the creation of a Living Wage Oversight Board to monitor the University's treatment of its lowest paid workers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 4th segment:
034. Vigils
047. Assemblies of protest or support
159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 5th segment:

034. Vigils
047. Assemblies of protest or support
159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 6th segment:

015. Group lobbying
034. Vigils
047. Assemblies of protest or support
159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Notes on Methods:
While the campaign was initiated on the 8th of February and lasted until the beginning of March, because the campaigners took no action between the 8th and the 17th, I have divided the time segments over the time period between 17 February and 1 March, and included the methods from the 8 with the first segment.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

- and staff at the University of Virginia
- faculty
- graduate students
- undergraduate students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
The University of Virginia Living Wage Campaign, David Flood
External allies:
The Organization of African Students, Black President Council, United Sisters, Memorial for Enslaved Laborers committee, the Collegiate 100 Society, the National Pan-Hellenic Council, the Black Voices student group, and the Minority Rights Coalition, The College of William and Mary Living Wage Campaign

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
University of Virginia Living Wage Campaign

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Black President Council
- Memorial for Enslaved Laborers committee
- United Sisters
- and the Minority Rights Coalition
- the Black Voices student group
- the Collegiate 100 Society
- the National Pan-Hellenic Council
- the Organization of African Students

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- The College of William and Mary Living Wage Campaign

Segment Length: 2 and 1/6 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
President Sullivan, the administration of the University of Virginia

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
not known.

Campaigner violence:
no campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:
No repressive violence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
2 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The campaigners were unsuccessful in their goal of having the University institute a wage of $13 dollars an hour before benefits indexed to inflation. They were unsuccessful in having the University of Virginia create a Living Wage oversight board, but the University did create a parallel of the faculty budget advisory committee through the student council that would give students oversight and voice into the budget making process.
Students, faculty, and staff at the University of Virginia began the first of a series of campaigns to improve the wages and working conditions of the University’s lowest paid employees in 1997. In 2006, students and faculty who identified themselves as members of the Living Wage Campaign conducted a year-long nonviolent struggle to raise the wages of the lowest paid University workers, which culminated with 17 students staging a sit-in in the President of the University’s office for four days before being arrested. After the arrests took place, the Living Wage Campaign at the University of Virginia was relatively inactive until 2010, when students restarted the Living wage campaign, and organized teach-ins, rallies, and protest meetings resulting in the University of Virginia slightly raising minimum salaries in November 2011.

On 8 February 2012, members of the Living Wage Campaign issued a list of demands to the administration of the college, asking that the University implement a thirteen dollar-per-hour before benefits wage indexed to yearly inflation. They chose this number based on the living wage for Charlottesville calculated by the Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank. The campaigners also asked for the creation of a Living Wage Oversight Board to monitor the University’s treatment of its lowest paid workers. Students with the Living Wage Campaign delivered a petition signed by 325 faculty members to the administration who supported the students’ demands.

On 17 February University of Virginia President Sullivan wrote an open letter to the campus in which she said that she supported improving the wages of the lowest paid workers on campus. She did not agree to the demands the students presented. In response to the letter, members of the Living Wage campaign threatened to hunger strike until the administration met their demands. David Flood, a graduate student and leader of the Living Wage Campaign repeated their demands at a rally on 17 February 2012, and twelve students began fasting. Going forward from that day, members of the Living Wage Campaign and other supporters gathered with the strikers on the steps of the Rotunda in the center of the University’s campus for daily rallies at noon, and for vigils at 6 PM.

On 18 February, the administration of the University of Virginia issued a statement warning the students that they would be held accountable for any violation of university policy, law, or academic standard. The letter included an affirmation of the students’ right to express themselves.

As the hunger strike continued, more students began hunger striking. Although several of the original fasters began eating again due to medical concerns, the number of people striking had increased to nineteen by 21 February. Sports Illustrated featured football player Wonman Williams who had joined the hunger strike. The campaign received national media attention from the Huffington Post and ESPN.

President Sullivan of the University of Virginia did not respond to requests from the strikers to meet with her. On 21 February she addressed the concerns of the strikers in an interview with the campus newspaper the Cavalier Daily by saying that she would increase workers’ wages if possible through the budget and not through any form of executive resolution.

That same day, the hunger strikers invited physician Greg Gelburg to speak at their daily rally. During his speech, he voiced his support for the campaigners, although he acknowledged the health risks the students would likely face.

On 22 February, members of the Living Wage Campaign at the University of Virginia marched to President Sullivan’s Office to symbolically deliver a page from Sullivan’s book, entitled “The Social Organization of Work.” The page they delivered contained a quote that had been passed out on leaflets at the Campaign’s noontime rally that day, reading ”Being paid a living wage for one’s work is a necessary condition for self-actualization... the provision of wages adequate to meet basic needs is a fundamental requirement before a job can be experienced as rewarding and meaningful,” The campaigners believed that this quote summarized the motivation for their struggle, and wanted to use it in an attempt to gain President Sullivan’s support.

Representatives from The Organization of African Students, Black President Council, United Sisters, Memorial for Enslaved Laborers committee, the Collegiate 100 Society, the National Pan-Hellenic Council, the Black Voices student group, and the Minority Rights Coalition all rallied that day in solidarity of the Living Wage Campaign to show the widespread support for its cause on the University of Virginia campus. In addition to the students who had been hunger striking since 17 February,
seventeen students fasted for the day in solidarity with the original fasters. That night, Professor Michael Smith led a teach-in discussing the current state of the Living Wage Campaign at the University of Virginia as well as the arguments for the campaign as they existed in the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

On 27 February Chief Student Affairs Officer Patricia Lampkin sent a letter to the hunger strikers asking them to eat in preparation for a meeting with the administration the following day. That same day, members of the College of William and Mary Living Wage Campaign from the previous year attended the daily noontime rally in support of the University of Virginia Campaign.

On 28 February, President Sullivan and other administrators met with five representatives from the Living Wage Campaign. According to both the representatives from the Campaign and the University’s spokesperson, President Sullivan maintained that she was already compensating the University’s lowest-paid workers as much as possible. Neither side made concessions.

On 29 February 2012 six members of the Living Wage Campaign met with administrators, but President Sullivan was not present. The administrators stressed that they were committed to raising wages but were under tight budget restrictions. However, the administration also requested that the student council at the University create an ad hoc committee to parallel the faculty budget advisory committee and to give students a voice in discussing the University’s finances.

On 1 March, the Living Wage Campaign held a rally at which they officially ended the hunger strike, declaring success in drawing attention to their cause despite not having achieved any of their goals. The members of the Living Wage Campaign at the rally resolved to launch another campaign in the future to continue to pressure the University to meet the demands. On 22 May 2012, the University of Virginia Board of Visitors passed a budget increasing the starting hourly wage of university employees from $10.65 an hour to $11.30 an hour. While that increase was closer to the wage that the Living Wage campaign had demanded, it did not affect the wages of the workers employed by the University’s contractors.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Living Wage Campaign at the University of Virginia was influenced by the previous living wage campaigns at the college that had been occurring since 1997, but specifically the campaign in 2006, during which a number of students were arrested during a sit-in. (1)

Sources:


